

The Yarn of Bill the Whaler.

"But what," said Freddie, the lad, to Bill, the whaler; "what was really the most extraordinary thing that ever happened to you?"

Now Freddie, the lad, was six, while Bill, the whaler, was nearer sixty, yet they were the greatest of cronies. Every fine day, and the days are always fine in Southern California, you might see the pair; the grey head and the gold, out on the rocks together or sometimes idling along-shore in Bill's boat fishing for rock-fish.

Many and wonderful were the stories that Freddie would retail to his father in the evening, and so well did he succeed in the telling that on rare but never to be forgotten occasions Mr. Hammond would make one of the fishing party himself, and then under the luxurious influence of an Havana cigar would Bill outdo himself and give his always vivid imagination unchecked flight.

"The most extr'ordinary thing that ever happened," repeated Bill between chews. "The most extr'ordinary? Wal, I don't know as how I rightly know which is the most plumb extr'ordinary."

"Cause dad's coming down to go fishing this afternoon. He said he wanted re-cre-a-shun, an' he told me to tell you to think of the most extraordinary thing that had ever happened to you and tell it to us this afternoon."

"Your paw is a very apprehensive listener and has uncommon judgment in the matter of Havana cigars," replied Bill, "and I will do my utmost to think of the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me, tho' it's a hard matter to decide in a hurry."

Half an hour afterwards, when the lines were baited and Bill had secured and lighted his Havana, he announced himself as ready to begin. Mr. Hammond settled himself comfortably in the stern under the shadow of the sail, while Freddie snuggled at his feet.

"Wal," started in Bill, "I don't know but what my viyage to the North Pole mightn't be looked on as fairly extr'ordinary, so I'll spin you that."

"Twas in the spring of '61 that I made the trip. It would prob'ly astonish some of these explorers to know that Bill Bristol, the whaler, had been plum to the North Pole and back agen, while some on 'em was a-rockin' in their cradles. I aint a bragging man nor yet a writin' man, so thet this is the first time I've spun this yarn and it'll likely be the last. In '60 I shipped with a whaler and we was out up north all the season and hardly saw a blow. The men was feeling out o' sperrits and the Cap'en was down with the scurvy, so we made for home and there I was, in the spring o' '61 back in New York agen looking fer a fresh job. I was hanging round the docks one day, talking to the mate of a whaling ship as was just getting ready to start—I was first mate with a clear certificate myself those days—when a nervous looking chap, wi' his face all kivered over with bright red whiskers comes up to the chap I was talking to and ses he:

"Wal," ses he, all excited, 'are you coming with me? Now don't disappoint me, I start tomorrow. My other man's sick, and if you don't come the president only knows where I'll get a first mate.'

"I told ye afore," ses the mate, kind o' short like, I thought, 'I've signed articles with another man and I can't come.'

"I'll make it twenty dollars a week," ses whiskers.

"No," ses the mate agen, 'but here's a man that'll go with you, mebbe,' and he brings me forward.

"Are you a qualified mate?" ses whiskers to me.

"I am, ses I."

"Then I engage you," ses he, 'at twenty dollars a week. Come along and look at the ship.'

"Wal, I goes and then we chews the rag an'

after he looks at my papers and goes to my last owners, we had the matter settled.

"He was an explorer, it turned out, what had a new theory about getting to the North Pole. We was to go up to a certain degree o' latitood and then, as far as I could see at the time, re-ship into a steel boat he was carryin' in sections, which was to be driven plum to the Pole by some new power he'd diskivered, and thet could only be fixed up north. He'd a powerful heap of trouble gettin' a crew together, it bein' a sort of on-certain kind of a job about ever gettin' back agen, but he was payin' high wages plum thro' and had as nice a set of boys, whalers every one on 'em, as ever throwed a harpoon.

"He was nominally cap'en, but I had the real charge o' the ship, he being below most o' the time makin' calculations. Him and me got reg'lar chums after a while and one day, when we was some three weeks out and well amongst the ice, he calls me into his cabin and tells me his secret. Wal, I didn't hardly credit it and likely never would ef I hadn't been there myself and seen it.

"Thankee, Mr. Hammond. Them Havanas is powerful good smoking, and gettin' mighty scarce, they're tellin me, sence the Cuban scrap.

"Wal, he got his idee from the Eskimo when way up amongst 'em one time. It 'pears that one on 'em had somehow or other got hold of a steel head to his spear, while all the others had theirs made out of bone in the reg'lar way. Of course he got stuck on himself, and the rest thought him a high muck-a-muck, so they elected him as a kind of a boss over them all. Wal, one day, he was out huntin' walrus with the rest way up nearer north than they'd ever been afore. He was ahead of 'em all, when all of a sudden like they sees his spear stick out in front of him like all the world as if something was pullin' on the other end of it. He yells at 'em, but they was all scared, and thought the Great Spirit had got hold of him. Wal, he hangs on to his spear like death, and whatever it was at the other end hung on, too, and in a jiffy there he was scootin' over the ice and yellin' for all he was worth, like the thing was luggin' him away.

"The Eskimos stood there scared to death, watching him till he was out of sight, going faster every minute. They never saw any more of him and his own grandson told the story to old whiskers."

"When old Rufus, as we used to call him, after a red-headed king they had in England one time; when old Rufus told me as far as that he jumps up and looks round and locks the cabin door, comes back to me and ses to me in a whisper: 'What do you think of that?'

"I think it's a lie," ses I, 'and a bad one at that.'

"What do you make out of the power as was draggin' him along," ses he.

"Rum," ses I, 'and probly traders' rum at that!'

"Rum, nuthin'," ses he. 'It was the magnetism, the awful electricity at the Pole that seized on his steel spear head with resistless power and dragged him to the axle of the earth,' ses he.

"Land sakes," ses I.

"And thet was his scheme. To get as far north as the Eskimo was when it happened, and then we was to get right into the steel boat, and every mother's son of us be dragged straight to the Pole itself.

"We'll be in the right latitood this time next week," he went on in my ear, 'and then you'll see Bristol; then you'll see, we'll plant the American glorious Stars and Stripes on the axle of the earth itself, and we'll all be famous, Bristol, my boy, we'll all of us be famous.'

"He was thet excited about it thet I thought it best to humor him right then, though I began to think he was goin' plum crazy. I didn't say a word to the crew becos I knew they'd want to turn back and we couldn't right then, becos,

though the ice was clear in front, it had be steadily closing up behind for the last two or four hours. However, I ses to myself, in a way from now, if the ice is clear, and you try to come any more of that crazy talk over us, inst' of sailing away to the axle of the earth, we'll sailing back to New York with you safe locked up in your cabin, Mr. Rufus Whiskers Esqueer.

"When the week was up, though I'd chang'd my mind, we was further north than I ever afore or ever want to be agen. We was skinnin' the western edge of a floe that stretched about due north for miles.

"The ice was all closed up behind us, and was looking every minute to see us pinched in the ice. Rufus was all worked up. We had the steel boat on deck and a curious affair it was, too. It floated all right, and the men thought it was built of steel so as to resist the ice, but had a pair of steel runners on the keel so thet it could be used like a big covered sled.

"In course there warn't no motive power, the men were puzzling as to how it was goin' to move. Old Rufus was wild over it and warn't goin' to give the snap away till the minute. We fitted it up and provisioned it as we thought we might have to use it anyway, and had it towin' along behind."

"We turned into a big bay in the floe about eleven o'clock, and was steering about N. W. Away to the west was another big floe thet was bringing down on us and I saw it was a matter of an hour or two afore we'd be jammed hard into the bay, but just before we came up comes whiskers to take the sun.

"At twelve o'clock, Bristol, we'll feel the fluence."

"Eight bells, sings out someone and while I says it, bump came that durned steel boat at the stern. We was still goin about six knots. I couldn't make it out, so I goes aft and she was steadily butting at our stern. And then somethin' funnier happened. There was a long chain lying on the deck and the blamed th'ing just went plum across the deck like a snake it fetched up agen the side."

"Due north," shouts out whiskers, and she did as straight as an arrer. The men got scared and then Rufus ups and tells 'em all about it, wants 'em to get in the steel boat. Wal, to it short, they mutinied and wouldn't go. I was in a bad fix, or would be in a few hours I decided to go. The doctor came along and three gets into the boat and throws off.

"She was the same shape as one of them vanas of your'n, Mr. Hammond, and just as she was free her nose turns due north, sticks her bows over the edge of the floe, thet we was drawn on to it and started, slowly at first over the ice, bound for the axle of the earth. The crew stood looking at us scared stiff and ship a-sailing on. After we'd got about five miles away we looks at her through a sort of window of thick glass, using our field glass and all of a sudden we sees her go down standing like a flash.

"I knowed it," ses whiskers, 'but I was disappointed in em I forgot to warn 'em.'

"The Polar magnet" ses his whiskers, 'drew all the nails out of the ship.'

"What was it," ses the doctor.

"We was slidin' along then at about fifty feet an hour and gettin' faster every minute, and Rufus, who had what he called a non-susceptible watch, told us we would increase speed the time and reach the pole at about three next morning.

"At two forty-five we was goin' like the wind. Ahead of us was the open sea and we could see an island with mountains on it and palm trees sticking out of the middle. The ice was